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SUBJECT: SHIA ISLAMIST DEPUTY PRESIDENT SAYS REACHING OUT
TO DISAFFECTED SUNNI ARABS MAY BE POSSIBLE

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Deputy President Abdel Mehdi told the Ambassador on August 24 that the Shia Coalition was willing to reach out to the Sunni Arabs on the language in the constitution. The Shia Coalition perceives that the future Iraqi central government will be weak. The Shia leadership, anxious for government initiative, will promote one or more regional governments in southern Iraq to address issues like economic development, he said.

12. (C) The Ambassador pushed for at least some measure of Sunni approval of the draft constitution on both military and political grounds. Abdel Mehdi agreed, and said that he thought the Shia Coalition would agree to grant a role to the future elected national assembly in laying out national guidelines for how governorates would merge into regional entities in a federal Iraq. He added that the Shia Coalition might also agree to give the national assembly the right to veto any new region by a two-thirds vote.

13. (C) Abdel Mehdi said that in return for such a concession the Shia Coalition wanted specific written assurances that the U.S. would be supportive of (a) Shia governorates merging if the populations in those governorates were to seek to move in that direction, and (b) economic development in southern Iraq. He said that even if regions were not to be formed, U.S. development assistance is greatly needed by the nine governorates of southern Iraq. The Ambassador replied that the U.S. is advocating a simplified provision on federalism in the draft constitution not to block Shia regions from forming but to boost Sunni Arab support for the draft. He pledged to obtain guidance from Washington about written assurances.

14. (C) Abdel Mehdi said the Shia Coalition might be prepared also to tone down the draft's language on the de-Baathification Commission's continued work. The Ambassador expressed his appreciation, but observed that this would not be a major concession; the commission will keep working regardless of whether it is mentioned in the constitution or not. Abdel Mehdi cautioned that the draft referring to the de-Baathification commission was published in Sabah newspaper earlier this week; removing it now would raise suspicions among the Shia public and would cost votes in Shia areas.

15. (C) The Ambassador also raised the language about religious freedom in the draft, and urged that the Shia Coalition restore the specific reference to an individual's right to religious freedom. Abdel Mehdi cautioned that within the Shia Coalition there was very little support for such language. He warned that making the proposed change would be extremely difficult.

Khalilzad